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C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 001914

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: BELKHEIR ON NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

REF: A. ALGIERS 1661

[B](#). ALGIERS 1702

[C](#). ALGIERS 1878

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RICHARD W. ERDMAN; REASONS 1.4 (B) (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Ambassador took advantage of a September 10 meeting with Presidential Chief of Staff Belkheir on other issues to ask about the September 29 referendum on national peace and reconciliation. Without detectable enthusiasm, Belkheir said the goal of the referendum was to move beyond the divisions caused by over a decade of terrorism, isolate and weaken those terrorists in the "maquis," and give the leadership authority and latitude to move forward on national reconciliation as the situation and attitudes evolved. Bouteflika, he added, was not simply asking for a straight "yes" or "no" on whether the public supported national reconciliation. He was asking them to vote on the provisions of the Charter, which would provide the government broad parameters and political support for subsequent measures aimed at promoting national reconciliation.

[1](#)2. (C) Expressing confidence the referendum would pass by a substantial margin, Belkheir noted that many people had the mistaken impression that major steps would be taken right away. In fact, the Charter, if approved, would provide the leadership the flexibility it needed to decide the pace and way forward, depending on how events, public attitudes, and circumstances evolved. The leadership understood how sensitive and difficult the process of national reconciliation was. It would not be easy for many in the public to simply forgive and move on. Nonetheless, most Algerians were prepared to do this in the interest of turning the page on the decade of terrorism, including 80% of the families of the "disparus".

[1](#)3. (C) Ambassador noted that some Algerians, including in the government, saw the referendum as a "gamble" whose impact (assuming it were approved) was not forordained. Belkheir said the leadership did not expect approval of the charter would completely bring an end to the residual terrorism of those who remained in the maquis. However, it would weaken the terrorists' support network while convincing many to turn themselves in. It would also make it possible for former FIS supporters who left the country but who did not themselves commit terrorist acts to return to Algeria, provided they did not engage in politics.

[1](#)4. (C) Ambassador commented that other countries that had had to face similar national tragedies involving "disappeared" had found it necessary to incorporate elements of truth-telling and justice into their approach. Historical experience suggested that without these elements, real national reconciliation could not take place. It was not clear from the Charter how these necessary elements would be provided for. Belkheir repeated that the process would unfold gradually and in response to evolving events and attitudes, as the situation required. There would not be impunity, he insisted. The referendum was not about a general amnesty but about a pardon in certain circumstances for certain categories of those who had been involved in aspects of terrorism. For example, those who had committed mass murders, rapes, and bomb attacks in public places would be excluded. And those included in this process would not be pardoned automatically but would pass through some kind of judicial mechanism that would be set up.

ERDMAN